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MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES

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THE SOURCES OF A *TALE OF TWO CITIES*

I

Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities* really consists of two tales, which he contrived to interweave with more than his usual art. These are the story of Doctor Manette's living death in the Bastille and that of Sydney Carton's self-sacrifice on the scaffold. These constitute the two strong situations, the beginning and the end of the action, from which and towards which, in the finished novel, all intermediate action flows. It is interesting to see, as we presently shall, that it was just these two situations which, when the novel was in conception, first shaped themselves in Dickens' mind and thus originated the whole plot.

We know from Dickens himself that the second, that of self-sacrifice, came first and was his motive in writing the novel at all. It occurred to him, he tells us in his preface, while acting in Wilkie Collins' play *The Frozen Deep*. This play turned on the sufficiently trite subject of contest between a successful and an unsuccessful lover. In disgust and vowing vengeance, the latter, Richard Wardour, offers himself for an expedition to the North Pole, in which his successful rival also engages. The expedition comes to grief. After some years the explorers determine to send a party to try to reach civilization and bring help. Frederick having volunteered, Richard does so too. The two get separated from the rest of the party, which succeeds in reaching Newfoundland, and finds there Clara, the apple of discord of the piece, come out from England in search of news. In despair, she is now preparing to sail for home again, when Richard appears, in the last stage of

exhaustion, carrying Frederick, whom he lays at Clara's feet. He confesses that he had originally meant to kill his rival but that gradually his heart had softened; in point of fact he had cared for him and deprived himself of food for his sake. Now worn out by hardship, he dies while Frederick recovers.¹

In the private theatricals in summer, 1857, at which Dickens produced this fantastic play, he took the part of Richard Wardour himself, and, in his usual way, not played it merely but lived it. From identifying himself with the character to the desire to embody it in a novel was an easy step, but for some months, as Forster indicates, the idea took no definite shape.² In other words, he had conceived so far merely the general situation—a man for love's sake giving his life for his rival—without details or local setting.

Thus the matter rested till the beginning of the following year. *Little Dorrit* had to be got off the stocks and it is not till the opening months of 1858 that we have indications of the new novel in his mind. Then it is evident that the second of the situations has now presented itself. His mind is now dwelling not on the end of the story but, naturally enough, on the beginning, to which he wished to get started. We find him proposing to call the novel *One of these Days*, or *Buried Alive*, or *The Thread of Gold* (in allusion to the power of Lucie Manette to make her father forget his past, as in the novel, Book II, chap. 4), or *The Doctor of Beauvais*.³ These titles all refer to the Doctor Manette side of the novel and he has obviously got it clear before his mind's eye. Further he has fixed on France (Beauvais), and what other prison in France for burying a man alive in would he think of but the Bastille? In short, he had now, we cannot doubt, decided on the French Revolution as the scene of events.

This he did under the influence of Carlyle's *The French Revolution* which, eight years before this, he declared he had read for the five hundredth time.⁴ Carlyle suggested the theatre of events;

¹ In some insignificant details such as the names of the characters, the original play differs from the story Collins afterwards made from it to read during his tour in the United States, 1873-74, and which may be found in the Tauchnitz Edition: *The Frozen Deep and Other Stories*. There is an abstract of it in C. Böttger's dissertation, *Charles Dickens' historischer Roman "A Tale of Two Cities,"* 1913.

² Forster's *Life of Dickens*, Bk. IX, ch. 2.

³ *Ib.*

⁴ *Ib.*, VI, ch. 3.

indirectly he was responsible for the figure of Dr. Manette too. For, having definitely chosen the French Revolution as the setting for his plot, he applied, as he himself tells us, to Carlyle for books on the subject and obtained in reply "two cartloads," among which almost certainly was "the curious book printed at Amsterdam," Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*. From it he got not only, what he admits,⁵ the material for his evil Marquis, but also, a much more important matter, the suggestion for the whole Dr. Manette story.⁶

For in Mercier will be found an anecdote, told with feeling and vivid detail, of one of the prisoners released from the Bastille by an act of clemency on the accession of Louis XVI, "un vieillard qui, depuis quatre-sept années, gémissoit, détenu entre quatre épaisses et froides murailles." "La porte basse de son tombeau tourne sur ses gonds effrayants, s'ouvre, non à demi, comme de coutume, et une voix inconnue lui dit qu'il peut sortir. Il croit que c'est un rêve. Il hésite, il se lève, s'achemine d'un pas tremblant, et s'étonne de l'espace qu'il parcourt. . . . Il s'arrête comme égaré et perdu; ses yeux ont peine à supporter la clarté du grand jour; il regarde le ciel comme un objet nouveau; son œil est fixe; il ne peut pas pleurer. Stupéfait de pouvoir changer de place, ses jambes, malgré lui, demeurent aussi immobiles que sa langue." He is conducted to the street where he had lived; his house is gone, the whole quarter is changed, nobody knows him. His tears and his strange clothing collect a pitying crowd around him. Ultimately an old servant of the family is found, from whom he hears that his wife had died thirty years before of grief and misery, that his children are dispersed in other lands, that his friends are all gone. Overwhelmed with grief, he goes to the minister to whom he owes his release and begs to be returned to his cell. "Separé de la société, je vivois avec moi-même. Ici, je ne puis vivre ni avec moi ni avec les hommes nouveaux, pour qui mon désespoir n'est qu'un rêve." The minister, touched by his unhappy case; puts him in the care of the old servant "qui pouvoit lui parler encore de sa femme et de ses enfants. . . . Il ne voulut point communiquer avec la race nouvelle qu'il n'avoit pas vu naître; il se fit

⁵ Forster, IX, chap. 2.

⁶ W. Dibelius: *Charles Dickens*. Teubner, 1916, p. 333. Professor Dibelius kindly supplied me with chapter and verse in Mercier.

au milieu de la ville une espèce de retraite non moins solitaire que le cachot qu'il avoit habité près d'un demi-siècle." ⁷

Here we have the prototype of Dickens' prisoner of the Bastille, "recalled to life" indeed but bewildered by and incapable of it. Manette too is released on Louis XVI's accession (the action of the novel begins in 1775), his wife is long dead of a broken heart, his daughter is in England, he is tended by his old servant Defarge who provides for him "une espèce de retraite"—his garret.

By what alchemy Dickens metamorphosed this slight story it is needless to say; but its identity in all essentials with his is self-evident.

So much for Mercier. In *The French Revolution* itself however there are two passages which are worth attention in this connection. Carlyle relates how, after the storming of the Bastille, a letter was found written long years before by a wretched prisoner to some monseigneur begging for news of his wife, "were it only her name on a card, to show that she is alive." ⁸ In *The Tale of Two Cities* just such a pitiful paper is sought for and found at the storming of the Bastille and some lines in it so clearly echo the corresponding words of Carlyle as to leave no doubt regarding cause and effect. I place them side by side: ⁹

CARLYLE

If for my consolation Monseigneur would grant me, for the sake of God and the Most Blessed Trinity, that I could have news of my dear wife; were it only her name on a card, to show that she is alive! It were the greatest consolation I could receive; and I should forever bless the greatness of Monseigneur.

DICKENS

If it had pleased God to put it into the hard heart of either of the brothers, in all these frightful years, to grant me any tidings of my dearest wife—so much as to let me know by a word whether alive or dead—I might have thought that He had not quite abandoned them.

Bk. III, ch. 10.

The echo is audible enough in the language; there is just as much echo in the incidents.

The other passage in Carlyle is that which tells of Loiserolles' self-sacrifice. "The Tumbrils move on. But in this set of Tum-

⁷ Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Le Tableau de Paris*, Amsterdam, 1782, chap. 283.

⁸ *The French Revolution*, Vol. I, Bk. v, chap. 7.

⁹ As Böttger has done (p. 13) to show Carlyle's general influence, without however attaching any further importance to the passage.

brils there are two other things notable: one notable person; and one want of a notable person. The notable person is Lieutenant-General Loiserolles, a nobleman by birth and by nature; laying down his life here for his son. In the Prison of Saint-Lazare, the night before last, hurrying to the Grate to hear the Death-list read, he caught the name of his son. The son was asleep at the moment. 'I am Loiserolles,' cried the old man; at Tinville's bar, an error in the Christian name is little; small objection was made."¹⁰ Here is a deed which appeals impressively to the imagination and might well recur to Dickens when the idea of self-sacrifice was occupying his mind and he was hunting around for a striking shape to give it. But one must not press conjectures to undemonstrable conclusions; there is here no necessary connection. Let the resemblance stand for what it is worth.

What is submitted here is that Mercier and Carlyle had a more immediate and important share in the invention of Dickens' plot than is commonly supposed. In two if not in all three of the passages mentioned above, they supplied the sparks (though no more) which started Dickens' invention off along the lines it actually took. The evolution seems to me to have been in somewhat the following order. Wilkie Collins' play supplied the germ of Sydney Carton and his heroism; Carlyle suggested the French Revolution as a melodramatic setting; perhaps too the great closing scenes of the prison and guillotine; Mercier gave him the Dr. Manette story, and into this readily fitted the letter episode from Carlyle.

II

If this be so, it may clear up a mystery which caused considerable controversy at the time. While Dickens' novel was appearing serially in *All The Year Round*, a play called *The Dead Heart* was produced at the Adelphi bearing so startling a resemblance to *A Tale of Two Cities* that the author, Watts Phillips, was charged with plagiarism. Yet it had been written in 1856 and accepted by the Adelphi the same year, long before ever Dickens had so much as thought of his novel. The play, which is difficult to get, is as follows.

¹⁰ *The French Revolution*, Vol. III, bk. vi, chap. 7. This resemblance too is noted by Böttger but relegated to the insignificance of a footnote (p. 20).

In the Prologue, the events of which take place in Paris in 1771, Robert Landry, a young sculptor, is affianced to Catherine Duval, the daughter of a Paris vintner. She is forcibly abducted by the Comte St. Valerie, who contrives to have Landry thrown into the Bastille on a *lettre de cachet*.—The main action begins with the release of Landry at the storming of the Bastille, eighteen years later. (Thus as in Dickens an early wrong, a later consequence, in two separate stories.) Old friends recognize him and the past gradually comes back to his bewildered brain. He hears that Catherine has married St. Valerie, but is now a widow with one son Arthur. He determines to avenge himself on the son. He becomes a deputy of the people, through him Arthur is arrested and condemned to death. The morning of his execution, Catherine gains access to Landry and pleads for her son's life. He remains insensible to her. At the very moment however when the tumbrils are beginning to rumble past the prison, he receives convincing proof that Catherine had loved him all the time and even that St. Valerie had been innocent of the worst of the wrong done to him. He arranges for Arthur's instant flight from Paris and takes Arthur's place in the waiting tumbril. The curtain falls on Landry mounting the scaffold.

Here you have all the impressive paraphernalia of the Terror just as in Dickens; an innocent man flung into the Bastille at the will of an aristocrat; a "dead heart" brought back to life after eighteen years; Nemesis threatening not the wrong-doer himself but his son; the final situation duplicating Dickens in almost every detail. No two stories could well be more similar without being identical and it is no wonder that suspicion fell on Phillips. He retorted by declaring that Dickens was the borrower, having heard the play read aloud by Ben Webster, the manager of the Adelphi, who was a friend of Dickens. The statement wants proof. Mr. Percy Fitzgerald nevertheless goes so far as to allow that Dickens may have been told the plot of the play.¹¹ But the case is surely explicable otherwise. Phillips admittedly owed, like Dickens, the local colour of his play to Carlyle's book; may he too not have obtained the suggestion for his two main situations (Bastille and guillotine) from it and Mercier's *Tableau*? In other words, Dickens did not borrow from Phillips nor was it a case of mere coincidence; it was

¹¹ Percy Fitzgerald, *Life of Charles Dickens*, 1905, II, 195-196.

a case of common source. I am not the first to come to this conclusion. Phiz wrote at the time to one of his sons in connection with the novel: "A rather curious thing happened with this book. Watts Phillips, the dramatist, hit upon the very same identical plot; they had evidently been to the same source in Paris for their story."¹² And to Chelsea, I would add.

III

Another coincidence remains to be pointed out, this time with a greater than Phillips. To most readers one of the most original scenes in all Dickens (as it is certainly one of the most impressive) is, I fancy, that in which the Doctor of Beauvais is summoned at night to attend a dying woman in a mysterious château.¹³ Yet that there is nothing new under the sun is shown by the occurrence in the fifth canto of Scott's *Rokeby* of an identical scene.

Edmund's ballad in that canto runs thus:—

" 'And whither would you lead me, then?'

Quoth the friar of orders grey;

And the ruffians twain replied again,

'By a dying woman to pray.'

" 'I see,' he said, 'a lovely sight,

A sight bodes little harm,

A lady as a lily bright,

With an infant on her arm.'

" 'Then do thine office, friar grey,

And see thou shrive her free;

Else shall the sprite that parts tonight,

Fling all its guilt on thee.'

" The shrift is done, the friar is gone,
Blindfolded as he came—

Next morning all in Littlecot Hall

Were weeping for their dame."

This ballad, Scott tells us,¹⁴ was founded on a story in Aubrey's

¹² F. G. Kitton, *The Novels of Charles Dickens*, 1897, p. 178. These particulars from Fitzgerald and Kitton I owe to Fräulein Käthe Tamsen of Hamburg University, who kindly copied out extracts from books not obtainable by me in Holland.

¹³ *A Tale of Two Cities*, Bk. III, chap. 10.

¹⁴ *The Poetical Works*, Author's Edition, ed. by J. G. Lockhart, 1869. Notes to *Rokeby*, p. 390.

Correspondence to this effect. "Sir ——— Dayrell of Littlecote, in Corn. Viltz., having gott his lady's waiting woman with child, when her travell came, sent a servant with a horse for a midwife, whom he was to bring hoodwinked. She was brought, and layd the woman, but as soon as the child was born, she sawe the knight take the child and murther it, and burn it in the fire in the chamber. She having done her businesse was extraordinarily rewarded for her paines, and sent blindfolded away." Having drawn her own conclusions from what she had been permitted to see, she immediately gives information, the deed is traced to Dayrell, and he is brought to trial; the unexpected upshot of which, acquittal through bribery, being the occasion of Aubrey's report.¹⁵ In an Edinburgh tradition (related by Scott in the same long note), the person summoned is a clergyman, and this clergyman it is, Aubrey's midwife not being a sufficiently romantic figure, that Scott introduced, tricked out in a friar's frock, into his ballad. In the tradition, as in the ballad, it is the woman, not the child, who dies.

Here then, in three different stories all antecedent to Dickens, we have his very situation of the midnight call to a bedside, the compromising amour, the beautiful woman on the bed, the tragic close. Did he know any of the three? Who shall say? He knew Scott's writings well for one thing; he was keenly interested in criminal cases such as Aubrey relates, for another. His large library too contained many old authors like Burton and Bacon and Evelyn,¹⁶ so that it is less improbable than one might suppose from Dickens' unscholarly turn of mind, that he had read Aubrey and come across the anecdote there. At any rate Scott's poem with the highly interesting note was accessible to him. Whether he had read the poem or, if he had, was struck by the insignificant ballad sufficiently to consult the note, is a wholly different matter.

And there is another point at which Dickens may have come into contact with the story. Littlecote Hall is not hid away in a hole and corner. The old manor house is visible to this day from the Bath Road two miles from Hungerford and this story of "Wild Darrell," as he was called, was well known in the neighborhood as late at least as the eighties when Outram Tristram wrote

¹⁵ *Ib.*, Scott's note.

¹⁶ For these particulars on Dickens' reading and library, cf. Dibelius, *Charles Dickens*, p. 298.

his *Coaching Days and Coaching Ways*. There is no reason why Dickens on one of his numerous journeyings should not have heard the story on the spot. Marlborough Downs close by were evidently known to him, judging by "The Bagman's Story" in *The Pickwick*.¹⁷ He probably passed along the Great Bath Road westward or eastward bound more than once in his restless life and can scarcely have failed to notice the quaint Tudor gables of Littlecote or ask their history. The "haunted room" is still shown at Littlecote, and the country folk still point out the stile where Darrell, having saved his neck from the rope, broke it at length by a fall while riding, his horse having shied violently at a flaming babe in the path! Darrell, it seems, was what we call "a thoroughly bad lot," and notorious for more than the midwife affair. He was "at feud with all his neighbours, accused of one murder, suspected of another, his name a byword for profligacy and something worse";^{17a} he ran away with Lady Hungerford, his neighbour's wife, and, what brings us nearer to our story, was reported to have had several children by the sister of one of his servants and to have murdered one of them.¹⁸ Quite a marquis-like figure this! Apart altogether from tradition, there exist, as the letter just quoted shows, authentic documents about the interesting owner of Littlecote, Darrell papers at the Record Office, and the deposition made on her deathbed by Mrs. Barnes the midwife.

Littlecote Hall figures in history just a hundred years after Darrell's time. It was there that William of Orange lay the night after his meeting with King James' commissioners at Hungerford in December, 1688. The fact is thus noted by Macaulay. "He retired to Littlecote Hall, a manor house situated about two miles off, and *renowned down to our own times*, not more on account of its venerable architecture and furniture than *on account of a horrible and mysterious crime which was perpetrated there in the days of the Tudors*."¹⁹ Now Macaulay may have learned this story from Scott's note to *Rokeby* which he mentions in a footnote—for the word "renowned" is only Macaulayan hyperbole. In which case Dickens may have learned it there too, perhaps attracted to it

¹⁷ Prof. Dibelius points this out to me.

^{17a} Outram Tristram, *Coaching Days and Coaching Ways*, p. 46.

¹⁸ Letter from Sir H. Knyvelt of Charlton, quoted by Tristram, p. 47.

¹⁹ *History of England*, chap. ix. The italics are mine.

by this very passage in Macaulay which is sufficiently striking. Or the story may really have been known to a considerable circle in the world at large, to Scott for example, and why then not to Dickens?

All which goes to show that the sinister scene enacted that wild night in the room at Littlecote was not by any means too obscure for Dickens to stumble across somewhere or somehow in his quest of the sensational. Whether he did or not, the analogy is too curiously close not to be worth noticing.

J. A. FALCONER.

The University of Groningen.

LES SOURCES D'UN POÈME DE LECONTE DE LISLE

Dans son étude sur *les Sources de Leconte de Lisle*, Montpellier, 1907, M. Joseph Vianey indique comme source probable du *Calumet du Sachem* (Poèmes tragiques, xxxii), le *Voyage pittoresque dans les Grands Déserts du Nouveau Monde* de l'abbé Em. Domenech (Paris, Morizot, s. d.). La préface est datée de 1860, dit M. Vianey. L'édition que j'ai sous les yeux, et qui semble être en tout la même, est datée de 1862.

Les rapprochements indiqués par M. Vianey, *Voyage pittoresque*, ch. xiii, p. 124; ch. xvii, p. 586; ch. xiv, p. 459, sont de valeur inégale. Le premier passage cité renferme des indications assez générales sur le *dolce far niente* cher aux Peaux-Rouges et leur goût pour les rêveries que leur procurent leurs "pipes de stéatite rouge." Le second est une très brève description des idées qu'ont les Indiens sur l'autre vie et pourrait en effet avoir inspiré au moins une strophe du poème, l'avant-dernière. Le troisième, qui contient un tableau très coloré des forêts du Nouveau Monde, mérite d'être étudié dans le détail et nous y reviendrons plus loin.

Disons sans plus attendre, qu'il faut savoir gré à M. Vianey d'avoir le premier signalé l'ouvrage de l'abbé Domenech que Leconte de Lisle a certainement utilisé, dans une plus large mesure même que M. Vianey ne l'a indiqué. Domenech n'est cependant point la seule source du *Calumet du Sachem*. Leconte de Lisle a puisé non pas à une source unique, mais au moins à deux et presque certainement à trois, comme une analyse détaillée du poème nous permettra de le démontrer.